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THE CATALAN CORNERSTONE, BY GAUDÍ

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Synopsis A study on the scenic-urbanistic structuring that Antoni Gaudí gave to several of his buildings, correlating them and giving Casa Milà the role of cornerstone.

Keywords Antoni Gaudí; Casa Batlló; Casa Milà; Montserrat; Sagrada Familia; Barcelona; Catalonia.

Cover image Monastery of Monserrat [commons.wikimedia.org/GuadalupeCervilla]

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Recapping

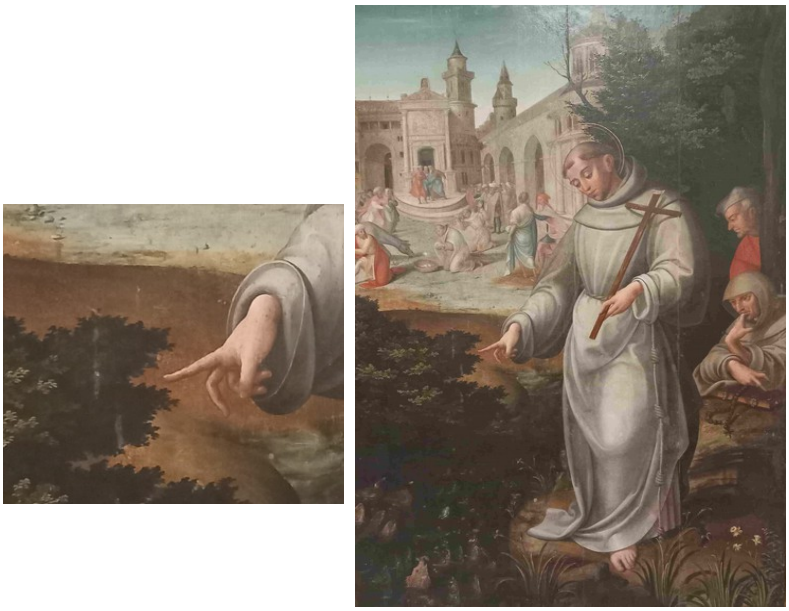
The polysemous nature of Casa Batlló was addressed in the last two monthly issues of this publication (#28, 29), namely its Napoleonic suggestion, as well as the way in which this building expresses the insane attraction to chaos, violence and corruption.

Antoni Gaudí, Casa Batlló, det. [commons.wikimedia.org/BernanrdGagnon]. The roof suggests the well-known dragon (Drac) of St. George, but also an iconic bicorne hat that ridiculed as a pretentious Napoleon whoever appeared on the small balcony-pulpit immediately below.

And yet, the same pulpit also allegorizes the lack of courage or commitment to face problems and threats, with the architect making his own self-criticism. In fact, penitential or expiatory exercises were common among intellectuals and artists (≈ the episode of Peter and the rooster, Mt.26:69-75).

In this specific case, the aforementioned empty pulpit also exposes Antoni Gaudí's hesitations in imitating his namesake St. Anthony[1] and, exposing himself to ridicule, preaching to fish, frogs, dragonflies, or other creatures of the corrupt Catalan swamp.

Comparative example



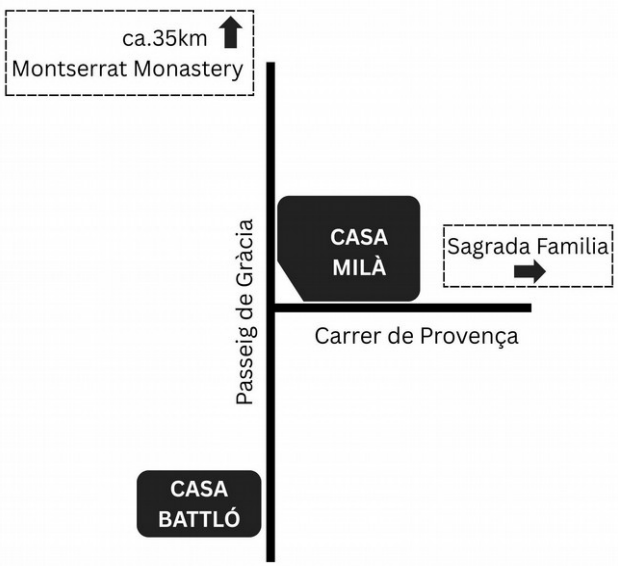
Garcia Fernandes, *St. Anthony Preaching to the Fishes*, MNAA [PMO].
In this 16th-century adaptation, the Saint offers a finger to a small "dragon" (shaped from a bush), allegorizing his subjection to ridicule before the insane. In the water, a pair of ducks attends the sermon along with the fish (another addition by the artist, creating a new layer of meaning).

Furthering

Redemption implies an individual journey that is also a collective one, in the form of a pilgrimage. As this study aims to demonstrate, the original idea was based on a direct counterpoint between the diabolical Casa Batlló and the distant Montserrat Monastery – the spiritual center of Catalonia, raised by God and built by ancestral compatriots (and recently rehabilitated after the pillaging and devastation carried out by the Napoleonic "devils")[2].

1 Since the names Antoni and Francesc were common in Gaudí's family, perhaps one can infer that Franciscan inspiration contributed in some way to the architect's theological vision of nature.
2 Primarily referencing sanctuaries (but not exclusively), geographical-symbolic connections were relatively common and quite ancient in the history of architecture.

The geographical orientation of Passeig de Gràcia itself (where Casa Batlló is located) symbolizes this processional and penitent path. Meanwhile, the commission for Casa Milà (further up and on the other side of the same Passeig) gave Gaudí the opportunity to complement the model with an intermediate point, namely, a Marian reference of intercession or mediation between Manking and the Divine.



Basic diagram

Antoni Gaudí, Josep Maria Jujol (assist.), Casa Milà [commons.wikimedia.org/BenjaminNuñezGonzález].
The front part of the building (≈ cornerstone) defines two paths, one leading to the Monastery of Montserrat (in an imaginary straight line extending the Passeig de Gràcia), and the other to the Sagrada Família temple, via Carrer de Provença.

Situated on a corner with Carrer de Provença and thus also connecting to the Expiatory Temple of the Sagrada Família, Casa Milà was conceived as a cornerstone, allegorically dividing the faithful into two fundamental categories (both with the right to Salvation), as can be deduced from biblical texts and liturgical celebrations – the selected shepherds led to the "choir" (Montserrat) and the numerous sheep to the "nave" (Sagrada Família).

Regarding its configuration, it is worth remembering that Casa Milà was sarcastically called "Pedrera" (quarry), and in any case it does indeed have a stony aspect, which is actually evocative of the patron Pero Milà (Pero/Peter/rock, upon which the Church was established, Mt.16:18).

Considering that the Church as an institution is symbolized by Mary, the initial project included an image of Our Lady of the Rosary to be placed at the top of the building, which in this case also honored Roser, wife of Pere Milà. In other words, the architectural undertaking is reminiscent, in its own way, of ancient paintings where donors appeared alongside their namesake saints.

The couple's likely passion for the Mediterranean could explain the building's notorious maritime character, of which this study is primarily interested in the exterior and urban aspects.

In fact, Casa Milà is composed of overlapping layers of interpretation, which integrate it into a scenic interplay with other buildings, starting with the nearby Casa Batlló, on the same Passeig de Gàcia. Thus, it should be noted that the undulating and triumphant Casa Milà provides a counterpoint to the violent Casa Batlló, whose Dragon is wounded in two distinct ways, the first of which is the work of its own diabolical allies.

Antoni Gaudí, Casa Batlló, det. [commons.wikimedia.org/BernanrdGagnon].
Gerard David, *Altarpiece of St. Michael* (central panel), Künsthistorisches Museum [commons.wikimedia.org].
In Casa Batlló, as mentioned in *Octógono* #28, the Dragon is pierced from the bottom up, i.e. by the supposed allies who cannibalize each other for power. The same fundamental idea is found for instance in this Gerard David's painting, where the uncontrolled devils also fight among themselves, allegorizing pure chaos.

As mentioned above, there is a second way for the Dragon to be wounded, in this case from top to bottom, a role usually played by St. George, patron saint of Barcelona who thus saved the virtuous Lady (≈ Virgin Mary ≈ Casa Milà).

Comparative example

Paolo Uccello, *St. George and the Dragon*, National Gallery [commons.wikimedia.org].

At Casa Batlló, the absence of St. George can be explained by the (frequent) use of his celestial equivalent St. Michael. In other words, on the grand urban stage[3], Antoni Gaudí seems to have used the passage of the Sun itself to suggest a celestial knight wounding the Dragon (in this case, the cosmic cross atop the tower symbolizes the sun's rays striking the beast, like a lance or sword)[4].

Comparative examples

21
Impia dispereunt maledicti cuncta Draconis
Agmina, iam ponę te draco ſæue premunt
Et Verbum Domini penes eſt Victoria lætis
Plauſibus eſca auibus turbâ prophana iacet
Cap. 19

Gerard de Jode after Jan Snellinck, *Icones Revelationum* (Armageddon) [commons.wikimedia.org].
Bonifazio Veronese, *St. Michael vanquishing the Devil*, Bas. dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo [commons.wikimedia.org/M0tty].

But this victory may not necessarily imply the death of the Dragon, but rather its subjugation and domestication, as can be seen in the picture presented above by Uccello, which is intentionally ambiguous in this respect.

det.

3 Despite the fact that allegorical exercises connecting buildings were relatively common, Barcelona had deep-rooted traditions of large-scale public theatre, which may have contributed to Gaudí's scheme even then.

4 Note that in popular Greco-Roman mythology, the Sun was believed to be moved by the force of celestial horses.

In other words, like a gargoyle or the head of a Napoleonic Medusa, the Dragon atop Casa Batlló is placed at the service of the forces of good[5], protecting in this case the Marian Casa Milà from threats that come from outside and especially "from below".

Comparative examples

Castle of St. George, Lisboa [commons.wikimedia.org/LBM1948] (det.)
Antoni Gaudí, gate/dragon at Finca Güell, Barcelona [commons.wikimedia.org/SBA73].
In Lisboa, the descending structure is obviously functional (adarve/chemin de ronde). And yet it also served an important psychological purpose, namely, to symbolize the victory over the serpent-dragon (guivre), now expelled and placed to protect the castle.

Moreover, the idea of protective gargoyles is visible in Casa Milà itself (≈ the Virgin's Castle), since its roof is protected by 30 chimneys that evoke the detachment of guards who went to arrest Jesus Christ, betrayed and sold for 30 pieces of silver (Mt. 27:3; Jn. 18:3).

Some of the chimneys on the roof of Casa Milà [commons.wikimedia.org/ArianZwegers].

5 For example, in a 12th-century text on the symbolism of birds, it is mentioned, “And thus the Lord declares that He is glorified by the dragon or the ostrich, because He so often converts both the clearly evil and the falsely good from their own inner thoughts to His service”. *The Medieval Book of Birds – Hugh of Fouilloy's Aviarium*, ed. CMERS – State University of NY, 1992, p.192.

Just as conventional, voracious gargoyles were placed to vomit water, these guards are penitentially obliged to exhale the smoke from the building, keeping it pure and free from the fumes of fury.

This point proves particularly important, as one of the ruling Marian messages lies in the self-control of emotions and impulses[6]. Like Uccello's dragon, Gaudí's *Drac* also appears as if "tamed" before the edifice a little further up, which in turn represents peace and harmony.

Perhaps this explains why, although without relinquishing overall direction and many specific aspects, Antoni Gaudí here gave his collaborator Josep Maria Jujol more responsibilities, to the point of making him almost a co-author of the building.

Ironically, in this building dedicated to Marian concord, the sculptural representation of the Virgin was never placed, apparently due to the owners' fear that it would attract the violent hostility of anti-clerical groups (a latent danger that Gaudí had allegorized shortly before in Casa Batlló).

In any case, this study considers the (virtual) existence of this element, given its importance in understanding the scope of the plan designed by Gaudí, including its allegorical representation of God's omnipresence, in the conventional form of the four natural elements[7].

Thus, the "Pedrera" celebrates the solid stone erected from the earth, like a Marian Castle of Virtue surmounted by the Virgin, protected by gargoyle guards[8].

In turn, by emitting smoke, these gargoyles allude to the concept of fire, which is intensified by the passage of the Sun on the undulating walls. That is, at least the central part of the building (which forms a "wedge") may suggest a large burning bush (Ex. 3:2), here in a Christianized and Pentecostal version.

But the main reference and source of inspiration is undoubtedly maritime. Adding to what has already been mentioned above, note that the owner, Pere Milà, being linked with the namesake St. Peter, was also associated with the idea of a fisherman[9].

His wife Roser also has religious ties to the sea, as many hermits' rosaries were made from fish vertebrae, in addition to the phonetic similarity between the words “mar” (sea) and “mare” (mother).

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6 In the History of Art, representations of Mary have evolved to emphasize her courageous stoicism, even in the face of the torments suffered by Jesus Christ.

7 See how this aspect was expressed, for example, in a 16th-century painting – *Octógono* extra issue (42) / Aug.9, 2026 – “A omnipresença apocalíptica do divino segundo Gregório Lopes e Francisco de Holanda” [academia.edu | archive.org].

8 Regarding the association between God and the idea of a fortress or secure rock, see for example Psalms 18, 71, 91. It is also possible that Casa Milà, which also has artistically crafted vents on the roof, alludes to the large, pointed boulders of Montserrat (an area also with many small caves, which may correspond to the recesses of the so-called "Pedrera" on Passeig de Gràcia).

9 Also a fisher of men (Mk.1:17, i.e. of souls). Possibly, the Sermon of Saint Anthony to the Fishes may also be alluded to here, since artists, including architects, always sought points of convergence that would allow them to densify the compositions in various layers of meaning.

Moreover, Mary herself is also intrinsically linked to the sea, for as one of the leading Christian preachers of the 17th century mentioned, "Maria" means *Domina Maris*, Lady of the Sea[10].

Also evoking the proud naval tradition that the Catalan *Renaixença* sought to revitalize, Casa Milà ultimately celebrated the sky (air, the fourth natural element), which merges with the sea on the Mediterranean horizon.

It was to heaven that the Mother of God ascended when her earthly time ended, so Gaudí's building, conceived on the threshold of ambiguity, can also be understood as a column of clouds (a bird is even represented on one of the balconies; in fact, only from a polysemic perspective does the building acquire effective coherence.).

Comparative example

Luca Giordano, *Assumption of the Virgin*, Prado [commons.wikimedia.org].
Intended to be crowned by a representation of the Virgin, Casa Milà is also made of clouds, where the people who appear on the balconies play the role of members of the celestial court (vs. the "devils" on the balconies of Casa Batlló).

The Marian reference to Casa Milà had the ultimate purpose of guiding and interceding for the faithful in their pilgrimage in search of Redemption (Père Milà and Roser as Adam and Eve). In this scenic, operatic conception[11], passing by the diabolical Casa Batlló, the "pilgrims" then arrived at Casa Milà, whose undulating waters rose like the Red Sea to provide not one but two passages[12] (see diagram on page 4).

10 See Padre António VIEIRA, "Sermão de Sto. António", in *Sermões escolhidos – Padre António Vieira* (sel., introd. e notas por Maria das Graças Moreira de SÁ), Ulisseia, 1999, p.75.

11 Historiography has already noted the "theatrical" way in which Gaudí organized spaces, particularly in Parc Güell; see Luis Fernando Viotti FERNANDES, *Gaudí and the establishment of Catalan cultural identity*, 2004, pp.9-10 (online).

12 These evolutionary associations between the two Testaments were systematic (following the logic of the Judeo-Christian religion); see the examples in *Octógono* extra issue (20) / Nov.3, 2025 – "The Vendramin Family by the skillful Titian (Tiziano)" [academia.edu | archive.org].

By making Casa Milà a cornerstone, the mechanism devised by Gaudí will most likely be the following: those very few whom God calls directly to himself in the Empyrean (Elijah being the case in point) will have to continue up the Passeig de Gràcia, passing to the right of the Marian statue and accessing, on an imaginary line, the distant and isolated Monastery of Montserrat.

This is the spiritual center of Catalonia, traditionally assigned to seventy Benedictine monks[13] – an order traditionally linked to theological culture, whose number evoked the seventy wise men who, through divine inspiration, uniformly translated the Scriptures (*Septuagint*).

Comparative example[14]

Palace-Convent of Mafra, det. [PMO].
Built in the 18th century, the central basilica and its corresponding monumental library symbolize the Empyrean and the Word (Verbum). While most worshippers entered the temple via side staircases, the king had direct, straight access by vehicle through two ascending parallel lines expressly reminiscent of the chariot of fire in which Elijah was taken to God.

Therefore, in the heart of earthly and sinful Barcelona, the direct path to Montserrat was particularly exclusive. The majority of the faithful (Gaudí included) were thus expected, allegorically and physically, to humbly take the left side of the Marian statue and follow the Carrer de Provença to the Expiatory Temple of the Sagrada Familia[15].

In turn, this great temple is also a complex polysemic structure, of which its scenic-urban aspect is of particular interest here. Thus, if the Monastery of Montserrat allegorizes the choir and the sanctuary proper, the Sagrada Família represents the nave for the faithful.

13 From the original 14 monks, the number grew to approximately 70. Coincidentally or not, Casa Milà is supported by 70 structural columns, which could indicate a symbolic correlation with Montserrat.

14 Regarding this symbolic mechanism, see *Octógono* n.8 / Oct. 2024 – "O Escadório do Real Edifício de Mafra" [academia.edu | archive.org].

15 Note that Casa Milà is longer in the Carrer de Provença, which was used to reinforce the idea that this was the route the majority of the faithful should take. This was therefore not the most direct route, symbolizing the pilgrims' tribulations. Some medieval temples (e.g., Chartres) featured labyrinthine floors that allegorized such difficulties.

In Latin languages, the word "nave" is, not by chance, synonymous with ship, highlighting the concept of a pilgrimage still underway under the guidance of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Similarly, and from certain angles, it might be possible to interpret the Holy Family temple as a pilgrim ship, with a large central mast.

Comparative example[16]

Nicolau Chantere, western portal of the Jerónimos Monastery/Santa Maria de Belém [PMO].
With a dense and polysemous iconography, the entrance to this early 16th-century ship-temple also represents the bow of the forecastle; inside extends the nave for the faithful-pilgrims; and at the back, the chancel is equivalent to the sterncastle of the captain (Christ) and his officers (clergy).

Concluding

Each work by Antoni Gaudí is in itself a repository of Catalan identity and patriotism, but also of modernity and cosmopolitanism[17].

Polysemous in terms of meaning, Gaudí's creations in various parts of Barcelona were also developed to be able to interconnect, making the city a stage encased by divine "Franciscan" nature, with the Mediterranean on one side and the majestic Montserrat on the other, distant but always present and zealous.

In this publication, across three consecutive monthly issues (#28, 29, 30), this theatrical dimension of the Catalan architect was explored. The first issue of the trilogy was published on June 10th, the centenary of his death; the second on July 14th, to coincide with another anniversary of the "chaotic" French Revolution; and now the third on August 15th – the day of the Assumption of Mary, but ironically also Napoleon's birthday, so the dance between the Lady and the Dragon will continue until the end of the World...[18]

16 Regarding this particular feature, see *Octógono* n.16 / Jun. 2025 – "O «Batel Divinal» do Mosteiro dos Jerónimos [academia.edu | archive.org].

17 While valuing and employing traditional local techniques, Gaudí also expressed a kind of Catalan Art Nouveau (incidentally, it is possible to draw parallels with some of René Lalique's works).

18 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFoOiSdCdN0&list=RDyFoOiSdCdN0&start_radio=1